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RUEHBUL/AMEMBASSY KABUL 2290
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 2221
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 1996
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SUBJECT: GOVERNMENT OF TAJIKISTAN OUTLAWS JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES

REF: DUSHANBE 1088

11. (SBU) Summary: In line with its increasingly restrictive controls on religious practice, the Government of Tajikistan has banned the Jehovah's Witnesses from activities in the country. Representatives of the organization have told us that they will appeal the government's decision, and that they will still continue to practice their faith here. The ban represents a step back for religious freedom and human rights in Tajikistan, and may be a harbinger of harsh measures against other religious groups. End summary.

Abrupt Decision to Ban

12. (SBU) By decision of the Ministry of Culture, the Government of Tajikistan has outlawed the Jehovah's Witnesses. The Ministry based its decision, dated 11 October 2007, on violations of the Constitution and the Law on Religion and Religious Organizations, and on an order of the Prosecutor General. In the order, the Ministry indicated that the Jehovah's Witnesses regularly committed violations of law because it has distributed "in public places and at the homes of citizens...propagandistic books on their religion, which have become a cause of discontent on the part of the people."

13. (SBU) On October 25, Greg Olds, the organization's Associate General Counsel, met with Ambassador to brief on the situation and the Jehovah's Witnesses' plans. He said that a representative of the Ministry of Culture handed the decision to the Jehovah's Witnesses' local representative on October 17, without explanation (i.e. without prior notice or an administrative process). The decision refers to a warning letter from 2000, and a three-month suspension letter from 2002. Olds, however, could not confirm whether the organization had ever received those letters. The Ministry of Culture did not provide the organization with the documents from the Prosecutor General that it referenced in its decision.

Part of a Broad Plan to Restrict Religious Activity

14. (SBU) Ambassador Jacobson told Olds and his associate, Vladimir Voyevodin, staff attorney for the organization in Kazakhstan, that banning the Jehovah's Witnesses represents a step backwards for Tajikistan on human rights and religious freedom, and that this action is part of a larger trend of clampdowns on religious associations and practice. The Ambassador said that the embassy expected to receive demarche instructions about this decision from Washington soon, and that we are also trying to engage non-governmental and international

organizations in country on the religion issue.

¶5. (SBU) Olds said that so far the Jehovah's Witnesses have seen no evidence of government attempts to actually enforce the ban, adding, however, that it has only been a short time since the ban was announced. He indicated that the organization will not hold meetings at its rented facility in Dushanbe, but that Jehovah's Witnesses in Tajikistan will still "do what the Bible tells us to do." In other words, they will still meet and practice.

¶6. (SBU) As for ongoing legal issues, Olds considers the appeals filed to release seized material in Tajikistan to be moot (reftel). The organization will appeal their ban first to President Rahmon's office, and if that is not successful, will then file suit in the courts. The Ambassador suggested that the organization also raise the issue at the Public Council, which falls under the competency of President Rahmon's Advisor on Social Issues. Olds further indicated that the organization had been constructing two Kingdom Halls one in Dushanbe and one in Tursunzade. Both are owned by Tajiks, and Olds speculated on whether the government would attempt to seize them.

Demarche Forthcoming

¶7. (SBU) Comment: Banning the Jehovah's Witnesses is part of a larger policy imposing restrictions on religious life in Tajikistan. We have learned that the Government has used similar means to ban another local Christian organization. The conventional wisdom has been that the Government was targeting independent Muslim groups, but it appears that all religious groups outside the Government's control are considered suspect. These actions may be harbingers of even harsher measures. End comment.

JACOBSON